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THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

NIC 9428-82
19 November 1982

Senior Review Panel

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chairman, National Intelligence Council
Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council

SUBJECT : Devil's Advocacy and the Estimative
Process

1. This memorandum responds to your request for Senior Review Panel views on a more systematic use of a "Devil's Advocate" in the estimative process.

2. We have considered the technique in several of its variations and applications. We have examined what we have been able to learn of previous internal experiments with such advocacy (Strawmen Projections, Competitive Analyses, Alternative Interpretations, Teams A/B, Dissent Production, etc.). We have reviewed external contractor support for a number of these efforts. The last of these remains an option or a supplement.

3. We have concluded that the record is mixed but that the technique may have substantial values. Among the most important of the latter are: (a) encouragement of more thorough scrutiny of available evidence and all-source intelligence; (b) heightened analyst sensitivity to alternative hypotheses and inertial mind-sets; (c) increased consumer awareness of probability ranges, indicator ambiguity, and policy sequels.

4. We can identify certain problems which have arisen in this record. They may recur. But we think that, if acknowledged from the outset, they are manageable. It is this consideration more than any other which underlines our view that the initial approach should be flexible and experimental. Among the more significant of the problems requiring safeguards seem to us:

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a. Community Participation. When and if the technique proves itself as useful as we anticipate, we think this should be wide but selective. In the initial stages, we would favor an Agency-only effort.

b. Analyst Comprehension. Unavoidably, Devil's Advocacy examination of significant intelligence issues will in some degree represent a direct challenge to these analysts who sense proprietary turf or vested interests in the judgments thus spotlighted. This could be productive of misunderstanding and hostile, defensive reactions. As between an attempt to maintain the enterprise in secret or to develop procedures to promote understanding and minimize antagonism, we favor the latter. We do not think that special inducements are as important in the process as giving the analysts concerned a participatory stake in the venture.

c. Format and Distribution of end products obviously require special attention. If not managed well and tightly, the program could be misinterpreted and affect institutional credibility. We think means can be found to identify the product clearly, limit instances for the use of the technique, and carefully control classified dissemination. In the early phases, management should clearly be on a case-by-case basis.

5. As indicated, we do not believe the problems overriding or solution-resistant. Accordingly, we would favor an effort now to introduce the technique into the estimative system. We think two principles should govern:

a. The technique should first be tried experimentally on one or at most two subjects;

b. The effort be mounted by the analyst production community (including NIC's Analytic Group): it should involve those who work the daily materials and the information flow.

6. We suggest that the starting point should be the compilation of up to a dozen subjects or Major Alternative Interpretations as a short list from which an order of selection would be made. Most of those identified would probably carry high risks to our interests. Some might be ambiguous. Many would be of low probability. We would be glad to work with the NIC on such a list.

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7. We think that the initial trial should be made in one of the currently quieter areas, both to assure a greater possibility of adequate attention and the detail of stronger analysts. It is not of course necessary that the Devil's Advocates should believe that a contemporary analysis or policy is fatally flawed. But it is necessary that those working the problem in the experientnal phase should be among the better analysts.

8. The aim of the initial exercise should be not only to test the alternative line, array its consequences, and devise sets of early indicators but also to develop methodology and approach for a possibly wider application of the technique. The Panel would be entirely willing to discuss or review the trial run while it is in progress and, if desired, to submit a critique when it is finished.


9. We have made no other distribution of this memorandum. We would be glad to discuss these views further with you.



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